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# Towards a Non-*Baudrillard*: Theoretical Violence and the Gift

Matthew J. King

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**Abstract:** Against the difficulty of thinking outside conditions of the contemporary age, this paper develops a non-philosophical cloning of concepts introduced in Jean Baudrillard's philosophy, with the aim of introducing a (counter-)gift against the present system's reproduction. Rather than locating a revolutionary subject in the conditions of reference determined by the (capitalist) system, but also rejecting the catastrophic and nihilistic counter-gifts proposed by Baudrillard himself, this paper performs a cloning of a philosophical decision implicitly present in Baudrillard's thinking between symbolic exchange (that which haunts the system), and sign-exchange/political economy (the system itself and its simulations), towards developing a non-classical revolutionary "subject" rooted in a plurality of knowledge practices. The cloning presents two new first names of the Real as "exchanged-without-exchange" and "(counter-)gifted-without-giftedness." These are then taken as tools for orienting thought for imagining the outside of a capitalist/semiotic decision and bringing forth an unbound "man-to-come." The paper thus situates future post-capitalist planning within a democracy of knowledge practices irreducible to the practices of thinking promoted by the system alone. These are already "(counter-)gifted-without-giftedness" to resist, with a theoretical, but not fatal, violence, the congealed thinking of status quo capitalism and fantastical unplanned alternatives.

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## Introduction

Jean Baudrillard's philosophy has, to some degree, fallen out of fashion in the contemporary scene and his theory is no longer as prevalent as French contemporaries Badiou, Derrida, Deleuze and so on. This is perhaps because of a turn from radical politics towards a nihilistic and ironized pessimism which, according to Anthony King, demonstrated "exactly what critical theorists must not do"<sup>1</sup> and, according to Scott Lash, actually proliferated an "uncritical and even irresponsible celebration"<sup>2</sup> of the postmodern. His philosophy no longer seems as radical, but it remains interesting to reconsider him as a quintessential thinker of the end times. This involves critically reassessing many of the strategies that he proposed against those conditions he diagnosed which have remained inescapable even today, including the intractability of modern capitalism and cynical nihilism in particular.

Whilst such analysis should not return to Baudrillard merely to repeat him, the inquiry envisions something more radical in a rethinking of his basic philosophical concepts from a "non-philosophical" perspective, putting him into communication and exchange with contemporary concerns in new and previously un-conceived ways. The project undertaken thus seeks to reconstruct Baudrillard via François Laruelle's non-philosophy, conducted through a dualysis of Baudrillard's concepts of symbolic exchange and sign-exchange, gift and counter-gift. The purpose, from a pragmatic perspective, being to develop a revolutionary subject evading the coordinates of the current capitalist system and its so-called "reality," the need for such a subject being justified in the first section out of the apparent failures of Baudrillard's fatalistic post-structuralist renunciation.

<sup>1</sup> Anthony King, "Baudrillard's Nihilism and the End of Theory," *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary*, 112 (1998): 89-106.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 2.

Conceiving of this subject, close readings of Baudrillard's theoretical concepts (the code, sign exchange and symbolic exchange alongside his proposal of "fatal strategies") will be attempted and followed by a justification of their relative limitations. A non-philosophical cloning of the materials of Baudrillard's philosophy of sign and symbolic exchange, gift and counter-gift, marks a key step towards the revitalization of Baudrillardian anti-capitalism. Yet, any new revolutionary subject, to be existing beyond the system's auto-critique and rendering achievable an alternative future to our contemporary capitalist horizon, ought not be recognizable in a classical sense (that is, be representational and naively divided from objects in a leftover from dualist metaphysics), as shall be demonstrated. How, prior to all this though, might two very different thinkers be aligned in the interests of a common task?

## Theoretical violence

Such alignment is conceivable around the question of heresy against the manifest and an assessment of whether radical thought ought to be "theoretically violent/terroristic," this being defined as a radical ("violent") dismantling of manifest and ordinary ways of thinking and theorizing, forcing significant reorientation. It is hard to neatly define this without already undermining its intention by returning to theoretical clichés which might undermine said "violence" in returning to convention. The best way of capturing it, however, is by way of explicating a Deleuzian approach of giving to a thinker "a child that would be his own offspring, yet monstrous,"<sup>3</sup> but understood at the level not just of mutated thinkers, but also of a society or politics as a whole. To be theoretically violent is then to take seriously the apparent nihilism or closure of conditions but, using these very conditions, to mutate them in some way that shows them only instead as contingent, as something which is mutated to be 'monstrous' against its apparent

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 6.

closure and completeness. This article moves from the term monstrous towards the term of “violence” because of associations between violence and terror(ism), the latter being something which can be used to orient both thinkers, and the former something which, in their own ways, their theory could be accused of lacking, even in this theoretical way.

Laruelle, considering this violence/terrorism with regard to theory complains in interview with Derrida that “[y]ou tell me that I am practicing terror [...but in fact there] are two readings of my text, obviously. There is a philosophical reading, one in which I do practice terror. And there is a non-philosophical reading, which is obviously my reading. And from the latter point of view, I am reluctant to concede that I am practicing terror.”<sup>4</sup> He denies an accusation of terror, suggesting it to be a misunderstanding and implying the terroristic act is in fact philosophical rather than non-philosophical. His project was not to declare war on philosophy, to engender fear in it by bringing it to an execution (a question of a complete rejection of philosophy) nor to petrify/“terrorize” it. Rather, it was primarily a specific *employment* of philosophy. Philosophy in the service of a kind of subject in a non-classical sense, “Ordinary man [...] stripped of his qualities or attributes by a wholly positive sufficiency” but not stripped of “his essence,”<sup>5</sup> and thereby of the means or want to practice philosophy altogether.

Non-philosophy is merely the corresponding mode of practice enabling one to do this, and it is the alternative (philosophy) which, for Laruelle, could be considered terroristic since it pushes everything to signify for the system at hand, as a

result of the structure of philosophical sufficiency (auto-determination of philosophy discussed later). Laruelle’s practice is heretical in resisting forced signification into invariant structures, but wishes to be neither terroristic nor theoretically violent, at least insofar as it does not belong to a structural violence of philosophy and its production of a petrified inability to think outside present coordinates. To consider a non-philosophy as a mode of “terror” itself in a more positive way, striking fear into a corrupt, oppressive or otherwise congealed system preserving certain binaries and power structures is not necessarily something Laruelle is interested in doing, at least directly.

Conversely Baudrillard, contra Laruelle, revels in such a “terroristic” position, naming himself explicitly as “a terrorist and nihilist in theory.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his self-description seems warranted both in terms of his criticism of popular Marxist and structuralist thought, striking fear into any proposed escape from or critique of the system within their coordinates (or decision(s), in Laruelle’s terminology) and his violent pessimism, arguing such escape is possible only through so-called “fatal” strategies, which I address later. Unlike Laruelle’s heresy, however, Baudrillard actually falls short of weaponizing what he also names “[t]heoretical violence,”<sup>7</sup> giving us instead only strategies that are *superficially* violent instead of genuinely violent against the *status quo*. He produces strategies that are largely impotent for striking fear into the capitalist system or the congealed form of theorizing that accompanies it.

Against this, the project of a non-Baudrillard is one which emphasizes the potential radicality of a theoretical violence which might in fact re-establish potent opposition to the *status quo*, as in Baudrillard, yet relinquish its reliance on fatality

<sup>4</sup> François Laruelle and Jacques Derrida, “Controversy over the Possibility of a Science of Philosophy,” trans. Robin Mackay, <https://pervegalit.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/laruelle-derrida.pdf>, 5.

<sup>5</sup> François Laruelle, “A Rigorous Science of Man,” in *From Decision to Heresy*, ed. and trans. Robin Mackay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), 163.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and fatal strategy which held him back. Laruelle, rather than Baudrillard, was the properly heretical thinker, but Baudrillard, rather than Laruelle, began from a (philosophical) perspective much more rooted in urgent contemporary concerns (particularly those of the questions of capitalist realism, terror and crisis in meaning), presenting an ambition for radicality which was laudable, but lacking in concrete praxis which was concerning. An adequate synthesis is rendered possible through an elucidation of this new subject hinted at above and named the “man-to-come.” Initially though, a detailed elucidation and criticism of the concepts of a standard (philosophical) Baudrillard requires attention. With the alignment of the thinkers and an elucidation of a general project now complete, that analysis can finally take place.

## Baudrillard

The section is split into two. It first considers Baudrillard’s political economy of the sign and how it unearths the limitations of Marxism and the reign of semiotics. This will define the employment of the code and sign exchange in Baudrillard and commence an analysis of symbolic exchange, highlighting its potential utility for articulating a new kind of anti-capitalism. The end of this part indicates to the contrary the failures of this and why it resulted instead in a turn to fatal strategy, particularly due to the limitations of Baudrillard’s “anagrammatic” approach. The second subsection considers these fatal strategies, including the acceleration of the subject’s demise, terror and fiction-theory in particular, addressing their impotence and justifying the need for a new subject facilitating a turn to non-Baudrillard.

## Political economy of the sign

Baudrillard employs the concept of a “code” in referring to system(s) of control which constitute the “reality” we experience. Andrew Rob-

inson interprets Baudrillard’s theory of the code as a system which “rests on a claim to programmatic infallibility – the ability to pre-programme reality. It is a “total descriptive universe.”<sup>8</sup> The concept changes subtly throughout Baudrillard’s career, but it is given even as early as *The System of Objects*, where he argues that the “objects-cum-advertising system” of consumer society is “basically a code,”<sup>9</sup> one which is “a universal system for the identification of social rank: the code of ‘status’.”<sup>10</sup> Here he distinguishes the code from the system of language, suggesting that it lacks the necessary syntax.<sup>11</sup> Later, however, it becomes clear the distinction is not as obvious. To see why, it is necessary to approach Baudrillard’s turn to structuralism to articulate the functioning of the code.

Baudrillard, taking a two-sided distinction in the functioning of the sign developed by Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>12</sup> proposes two dimensions along which language may be understood:

The structural dimension of language ( $L_1$ ): any term is relative to any other term, “internal to the system and constituted by binary oppositions.”<sup>13</sup>

The functional dimension of language ( $L_2$ ): every term is related to what it designates.

$L_1$  refers to relations between signifiers (Sr) whilst  $L_2$  designates the function of the signi-

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Robinson, “An A to Z of Theory: Jean Baudrillard: The Code,” *Ceasefire Magazine* (April 2012), <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-baudrillard-5>.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 2005), 212 [*Le Système des objets* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 270.] Reference to French editions given for selected texts where their position in Baudrillard’s oeuvre is relevant.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., [271].

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., [270].

<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 76-77.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage Publications, 2017), 28.

fied (Sd), meaning that which is denoted by the word. Together they constitute the concept of the sign. For Baudrillard,  $L_2$  mirrors Marxian theorization of use-value (UV), playing “the role of the horizon and the finality of the system of exchange-values” (EV),<sup>14</sup> suggesting that  $L_2$  also finalizes structural relations held together by  $L_1$ . This is a significant identification and is introduced because Baudrillard defends the idea that, as Anthony King puts it, theory “must go beyond Marx to see that claims to material objectivity are themselves part of capitalist hegemony.”<sup>15</sup> Baudrillard wishes to justify this in maintaining that ideology “can no longer be understood as an infra-superstructural relation between a material production (system and relations of production) and a production of signs (culture, etc.), which expresses and masks the constitution at the ‘base’.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, ideology is not, for Baudrillard, the masking over of “true” material conditions at the base, but rather the “*very form* that traverses both.”<sup>17</sup> Ideology thereby “*lies already whole in the relation of EV to UV, that is, in the logic of the commodity*, as is so in the relation of Sr to Sd, i.e., in the internal logic of the sign.”<sup>18</sup> It is precisely these oppositions (EV to UV, Sr to Sd), reproduced at different levels, which highlight the structuring of any *critique* of ideology as *always already structured ideologically*, i.e. that attempts to critique the alienation at the level of exchange, or in the systems of cultural capital picked out in  $L_1$ , cannot simply be conducted from a posited pure viewpoint of “material objectivity” itself. This would perhaps explain why material analysis (and revealed contradictions) do not, on their own, produce adequate opposition to social, economic and emerging environmental

catastrophes, since the true functioning logic of the “material” system is always already obscured. If this is convincing, what would be the path of escape? Baudrillard’s bind seems to mirror the bind of “capitalist realism” identified by Mark Fisher and Slavoj Žižek,<sup>19</sup> a defining issue of our time requiring theoretically violent strategic responses. Baudrillard’s most productive but ultimately impotent proposal for addressing this was to try understanding capitalism, and its sign logic granting objects a kind of “aura”<sup>20</sup> fundamentally connected to the reproduction of class, in terms of the obfuscation of a more fundamental *third* form of exchange, one which was symbolic rather than sign-related or economic.

Whereas for Baudrillard sign exchange operates with the split between  $L_1$  and  $L_2$ , Sr and Sd, where the primary term ( $L_1$ ) represents the play of signifiers (general equivalent) and  $L_2$  merely sustains the fantasy of a real kernel beyond  $L_1$ , symbolic exchange, characteristic according to Baudrillard of primitive societies, operates differently. The reduction of meaning to general equivalency, one that is always deferred, is the logic and functioning of sign exchange, yet conversely symbolic exchange is supposed to function in terms of a “collective movement of exchanges,” as opposed to exchange functioning expressed in “the law of the Father and the individual psychical reality principle.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, symbolic exchange is a *social* exchange without general equivalent (in law), i.e. without a totalizing structure. It does, however, still have a general structure apparent with each individual exchange. This is best identified in Marcel Mauss’s theory of the gift as “the obligation to give, the obligation to receive and reciprocate.”<sup>22</sup> For Baudrillard, symbolic exchange is a

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony King, “Baudrillard’s Nihilism,” 90.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), 143; [*Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 173].

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 144 [173].

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. [174].

<sup>19</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009); Slavoj Žižek, *Like a Thief in Broad Daylight* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Baudrillard, *For a Critique*, 120 [140].

<sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. W. D. Halls (Oxon: Routledge, 2002), 50.



form of gift and counter-gift and the fatal strategies introduced later are formed as a kind of “counter-gift” to what the system “gifts” us, an attempt to re-introduce an antagonistic dimension against its supposed totalizing identity. It is through this maneuver that Baudrillard hopes to escape the “orgy of differences” making up what he terms the “‘invention’ of the Other,”<sup>23</sup> something noticeably important in a contemporary situation where alternative futures feel inconceivable and there is no proper antagonistic force contra general equivalency.

There is, however, a significant issue with this “primitive” symbolic exchange which might be said to haunt the general equivalency of an impotent present. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner characterize this in their criticism of Baudrillard through the word “dreaming,” which cannot but convey the proposal’s naivety: “Baudrillard is positing – or dreaming of – another break in history as radical as the rupture between symbolic societies and capitalism which would constitute a return to symbolic societies as his revolutionary alternative.”<sup>24</sup> This is “dreaming” because, as Baudrillard himself seems to recognize, if one is not able to “give anything back,” that is, return the gift (counter-gift) to capital, “they are nothing,” and since humans have “put an end to this dual relation”<sup>25</sup> by being subsumed, according to Baudrillard’s totalizing logic, by general equivalence, escape strategies have, rather than become revolutionary, instead become *impossible* (or else based purely on contingency or chance). “Everything starts from impossible exchange.

The uncertainty of the world lies in the fact that it has no equivalent anywhere.”<sup>26</sup> There might

be “another break in history” but there is no means of controlling it, of revitalizing the “Dual Form” (“revisability internal to the irreversible movement of the real”).<sup>27</sup>

This dual form, symbolic exchange, thus haunts the sign exchange (and its maximal logic, that of the simulacrum, complete disappearance of reality) but hence always already appears lost, resulting only in “dreaming.” At this point, it is hard to see how radical politics could be satisfied with this bleak and totalizing account, although it might be tempting in light of recent revolutionary failures. Yet, Baudrillard does not intend to suggest there is no appropriate strategy to revive it. Instead, there is an anagrammatic strategy and a turn later to “fatal” strategy which must also be assessed.

Firstly, it is necessary to briefly address the anagrammatic, understood as a way of revitalizing the symbolic through a reestablishment of a mode of poetic language which is not language in its current signifying form (signifier/signified,  $L_1$  and  $L_2$ ). Baudrillard explicates Saussure’s theory of anagrams<sup>28</sup> extending their application beyond Saussure’s analysis of Saturnine poetry towards a general strategy mirroring the primitive symbolic gift-exchange outlined above. Illustrating how anagrammatic strategy is intended to function Baudrillard highlights several principles, the key being that a “vowel has no right to figure within the Saturnine unless it has its counter vowel,”<sup>29</sup> paralleling how there was no excessive (deferred) element in the primitive (symbolic) gift-exchange either. Distinguished from ordinary language, whose signs carry an excessive meaning in the interrelations and word associations made between signifiers, the poetic anagram ensures cancellation, hence the crucial element of the law, that “*nothing remains of*

<sup>23</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1993), 124.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 115-6.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 148.

<sup>26</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2001): 3.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil*, 16.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 213-57.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 215.

it.”<sup>30</sup> Everything is effectively and smoothly exchanged without any general equivalent, unlike Baudrillard’s totalizing “code” whose exchange value must always have one.<sup>31</sup> That the poetic is thereby “irreducible to the mode of signification”<sup>32</sup> is meant to elucidate the possibility for a language, mode of communication, existing beyond the totalizing code, a way of speaking beyond its “reality.” Yet, clearly, there are some apparent limitations.

Foreshadowing his later nihilistic turn, it seems Baudrillard is quite happy to abandon the concepts of “value,” progress, meaning and so on in his strategy of “poetic” resistance against signification. The poetic is heavily reduced and, in its turn, restricted to a specific logic, one which challenges the system’s code but only in its nihilism, ensuring “nothing remains of it.” To be more specific, it is a variant of nihilism paralleled by Georges Bataille’s theory of excess. Bataille proposes that “Man’s disregard for the material basis of his life [...] assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have. Beyond our immediate ends, man’s activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfillment of the universe,” suggesting moreover that “if the system can no longer grow [...] it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically.”<sup>33</sup> Comparing this to Baudrillard’s anagrams, there is both a sense of the futility of projects beyond their immediate functionality (the gift-exchange, or the vowel and the counter vowel) and also of the need for a *complete return*, or sacrifice, whether that be poetic or literal. In either the system’s code, or Baudrillard’s anagrams, there remains no possibility for a subject not immediately and completely returned (sacrificed/lost). Whilst this may be an improvement on the system’s reproduction, simulating only its own *signs*

of functionality (“meaning” and so on), Baudrillard’s poetic language cannot transmit meaning beyond its functionality (its structural system) either. It remains difficult to envisage how it can offer sufficient solutions for long-term planning, something desperately needed to face up to modern threats of ecological catastrophe, mass poverty and so on.

Whilst such global resource shortages and inequalities mean Baudrillard and Bataille are undoubtedly right to raise the significance of the “material basis” for our lives (and our general misunderstandings of it), one must be sceptical of strategies not facilitating global mobilization needed to address that which is so significant. If Baudrillard finds a route back to symbolic exchange only in old, generally long discarded, Latin poetic forms and examples of ritual practice, potlatch, etc. these should be treated as little more than the “dreaming” depicted by Best and Kellner before. There is no obvious possibility of return, and primitivism offers no adequate replacement for the failed Third Worldism Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari were so critical of, disparaging the withdrawal from the world market as “a curious revival of the fascist ‘economic solution’,” urging us instead “to go further,”<sup>34</sup> rather than seek naïve escape in the sheer contingency of such perceived withdrawal.

The anagrammatic strategy is unsatisfactory and its parallels with Bataille perhaps foreshadow Baudrillard’s own obsession with excess and transgression, something which Lyotard in “Energumen Capitalism” convincingly critiqued in terms of its impotence.<sup>35</sup> Such failure in this regard is even more apparent coming to fatal strategy, where interrelated critiques will receive further address.

<sup>34</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 276.

<sup>35</sup> Jean- François Lyotard, “Energumen Capitalism,” in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, trans. and ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, 2nd edn. (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2017), 203.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: Volume 1* (New York: Zone Books, 2013), 21.



## Fatal strategy

Best and Kellner interpret “fatal” strategy as the pursuit of “a course of action or trajectory to its extreme, attempting to surpass its limits, to go beyond its boundaries.”<sup>36</sup> This approach is, in a broader and more ambiguous way, present as early as *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, where there is already a hint of the extremity which must supposedly be reached if one seeks to overcome the “functional and terrorist organization of the control of meaning.”<sup>37</sup> Radical action must, according to Baudrillard, take place through a “total revolution, theoretical and practical” where even signs, the system of language itself, “must burn.”<sup>38</sup> Yet, it remains unclear precisely what this “revolution” must look like and, as Baudrillard’s career progressed, his conception of “total revolution,” or even if it should be *revolutionary* at all, would vary quite significantly. Revolutionary strategy became fatal strategy and two key exemplars of this are in terror and the turn to the radicalized object.

The question of terror is prevalent in Baudrillard’s work and his understanding of the phenomenon is quite complex. To begin, the relationship between evil and terror should be considered since, as Baudrillard puts it, “the real problem, the only problem, is: where did Evil go? And the answer is: everywhere.”<sup>39</sup> Elucidating this, there are parallels which can be drawn between Baudrillard and his compatriot Alain Badiou, who challenges the contemporary understanding of evil similarly, arguing that the entirety of “contemporary ethical ideology is rooted in the consensual self-evidence of Evil.”<sup>40</sup> Evil is seen as an *a priori* determination which is only the grounding for a “stodgy conservatism” that “prohibits every broad, positive vi-

sion of possibilities”<sup>41</sup> in strategy. This could be read as a tendency amongst ethicists to reduce conceptions of Evil down towards a general equivalency (*sign* of Evil) against which everything can be measured, such as, for example, the horrors of Nazi Germany. Yet, as Badiou lucidly suggested, this is just to “subordinate the question of Evil,”<sup>42</sup> not to truly address it. Evil is not found in a “measure without measure”<sup>43</sup> of a general equivalent but rather as a multiplicity of singularities irreducible to a single measure. There are many types of Evil, but the “code” of the system, in Baudrillardian terms, reduces it merely to one and, as Baudrillard claims, man can thereby no longer speak of Evil, but merely “discourse on the rights of man – a discourse which is pious, weak, useless and hypocritical.”<sup>44</sup>

Terror, conversely, can be understood as symptomatic of a society where adequate expressions of systematic evil seem impossible and only “violent form[s] of abreaction”<sup>45</sup> are conceivable alternatives to the code. If evil is “everywhere,” the only transgressive act becomes a (fatal) terrorism which is, in a sense, merely a more accelerated, perhaps the *most* accelerated, form of the system itself. This does not necessarily make terror a potent strategy though, and it can be said, as Baudrillard does, that terrorism already “exists potentially in the emptiness of the screen,”<sup>46</sup> that is, in that which is made possible and necessitated by mediatization. It is thus not really an external force to capitalism but, as previously suggested, a *symptom* of it: “such violence is not so much an event as the explosive form assumed by an absence of events,”<sup>47</sup> an absence immanent to the system. There is, however, crucially still a sense in which the system doesn’t *want* to be pushed towards its own limits and to push it

<sup>36</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 131.

<sup>37</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *For A Critique*, 163 [199].

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Transparency*, 81.

<sup>40</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward, (London: Verso, 2001), 58.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Transparency*, 85.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 76.

in this way is, thereby, still more radical than to attempt merely to negate the system in favour of coordinates assumed to be more “natural” or objective.

By accepting the represented (assumed “natural”) logic of the system and categories of labor, it seemed to Baudrillard as if “capital itself whispered these pedantic distinctions to Marx, while never being stupid enough to believe in them itself.”<sup>48</sup> Instead, capitalism, as Baudrillard identified it, was concerned purely with the reproduction of the *sign* of labor, not with labor purported ends. On this basis alone, there might have been some radicality found within acts of extreme violence, against an economic situation where “life [itself is] taking death hostage,”<sup>49</sup> reproducing again and again the repressive *sign* of labor and the exploitative systems accompanying it within modern capitalism. The fatal act of terrorist violence is thereby an act *refusing* these coordinates, of reproduction and the identity of the same, becoming instead a *symbolic* act. Yet, at the same time, escaping identity becomes here merely a choice of passive capitalist participation or nihilistic destruction, with no hope of truly escaping or evading the code. Terrorism, then, is still purely nihilistic.

Whilst the function of death in Baudrillard’s primitive society saw its members living with their dead “under the auspices of the ritual and the feast,”<sup>50</sup> the ritual function of killing (sacrifice) is quite distinct from anything modern, all existing within a dual-relation now having been extinguished. Violent terrorism is, conversely, merely a “monstrous double”<sup>51</sup> of this primitive form, having no potent methodology for sustained liberation at all. Interestingly, however, Baudrillard attempts a rekindling of “terroristic” strategy from the angle of what this inquiry has

called theoretical terror. This has two key modes of approach, both interconnected to some degree. Firstly, it is a “fiction-theory”<sup>52</sup> exploring a fatal logic with, perhaps, the hope of engendering a rupture bringing about a new proper dual (symbolic) relation. Secondly, employing elements of that former approach too, it is a turn towards the object and a radicalisation of the *fatality* of the subject.

Considering the terror of “fiction-theory,” this is exemplified in the later writings on America,<sup>53</sup> which Mike Gane argues to be “the most problematic of all Baudrillard’s writing” and even amount to the “complete abandonment of academic, scientific styles of work.”<sup>54</sup> That it is “shocking to read” and a “rapid escalation of stakes”<sup>55</sup> is notable and, perhaps, even a suggestion of its success in engendering a theoretical terror, albeit only if it carries genuine strategic potential. Gane suggests that the “gains come in the theory of simulation,” but from the perspective of radicality this might rather be an even further fall into the trap of impotent totalization, where “it is not even of the slightest relevance to say, at this juncture the real world still exists.”<sup>56</sup> This reproach is convincing since there is no longer even any hinted gesture at positing a revolutionary theory. A criticism of “postmodern suspicion[s] of positive programmes for social action and emancipation” being “a ‘mere trap’ for rejecting all forms of politics and hence for supporting the present state of affairs,”<sup>57</sup> a view Best and Kellner trace to Félix Guattari, is thereby even more damning. Fiction-theory might be defended insofar as by forcing “readers to experience the stifling incoherence of a culture of simulacra [...Baudrillard terrorizes the reader]

<sup>48</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange*, 39.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>51</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Intelligence of Evil*, 145.

<sup>52</sup> Mike Gane, *Baudrillard’s Bestiary: Baudrillard and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003), 94.

<sup>53</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Mike Gane, *Baudrillard’s Bestiary*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory*, 97.

forcing them to acknowledge the true nature of their culture,”<sup>58</sup> as Anthony King suggests, yet this is still not a way out but instead, as King proposes, a way of no longer situating modern capitalism in a historical context and instead absolutizing it, believing its “own self-definition.”<sup>59</sup>

This could only be defended if, in horror of this, the work understood as creative literature became able to mobilize action and open up the world to new possibilities. Yet this is precisely what King suggests is lacking, since “his later writing cannot really be said to be creative prose [...] They do not open up a fragmented world, but rather stand back from that world, offering detached criticisms and generalizations about it.”<sup>60</sup> Accepting this critique means agreeing that Baudrillard’s turn from representation of the world, in standard academic mode, to a rejection of the very notion of “real world,” as Kane suggested, is still stuck in a representational mode. The last fatal strategy, the theoretical terror engendered by turning away from the representational subject towards the object shows the impotence of such a strategy even if it were to be actualized.

The turn to the object is an attempt to capture and perhaps even accelerate what is termed the “revenge of the object.”<sup>61</sup> Kellner depicts this as “a bizarre metaphysical scenario concerning the triumph of objects over subjects within the ‘obscene’ proliferation of an object world so completely out of control that it surpasses all attempts to understand, conceptualize and control

it.”<sup>62</sup> Whilst this metaphysical approach is not without interest,<sup>63</sup> the inquiry here is concerned with whether it offers radical *theoretical violence*.

Baudrillard draws on a “fatal reversibility of the object” that “lies in wait for us”<sup>64</sup> and this logic seems to make sense in terms of questions of climate change and ecological catastrophe although, again, it remains unclear why such an approach would actually properly rekindle symbolic exchange in a way that makes escape seem conceivable. Rather, “fatal reversibility” appears only to signify a “fatal” solution instead of an imaginative escape. If the object for Baudrillard, as Kellner argued, “surpasses all attempts to understand,” then does this not render the crises and contradictions of contemporary capital unsurpassable? In merely following or even accelerating this logic Bryan S. Turner and Chris Rojek are right in suggesting that “Baudrillard fatalistically [presents] himself as a symptom instead of a solution,”<sup>65</sup> and they draw attention here to Baudrillard’s writings on America too, where his “restless circling through the highways of America parallels the circlings of the sign in the sign economy,”<sup>66</sup> simply reproducing the same totalized inescapability.

Richard G. Smith identifies Baudrillard’s thought as an attempted “nonrepresentational theory,”<sup>67</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Anthony King, *Baudrillard’s Nihilism*, 97.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>61</sup> Guy Bellavance, “Revenge of the Crystal: An Interview with Jean Baudrillard,” in *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny 1968-1983* ed. and trans. Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 18.

<sup>62</sup> Douglas Kellner, “Jean Baudrillard,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2015), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/ baudrillard/>>.

<sup>63</sup> For a proper address of the metaphysical/ontological significance of objects in Baudrillard’s work see Matthew King, “Object-Oriented Baudrillard? Withdrawal and Symbolic Exchange,” *Open Philosophy* 2 (2019), 75-85.

<sup>64</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, trans. Philip Beitchman and W. G. J. Niesluchowski, ed. Jim Fleming (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 72.

<sup>65</sup> Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner, “Introduction: Regret Baudrillard?” in *Forget Baudrillard*, ed. Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (London: Routledge, 2004), xii.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Richard G. Smith, “Baudrillard’s Nonrepresentational Theory,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 21 (2003), 69.

and this mode is particularly apparent in these fatal strategies where Baudrillard turns away from the representational subject to try to escape the logic of the sign via acceleration of the object's *revenge* instead. Yet, in the two previous discussions, his writings were demonstrated not to have achieved a fully non-representational approach and, in analysing the revenge of the object, regaining symbolic exchange remained impotent and symptomatic rather than genuinely theoretically violent as was hoped. This can all be explained by suggesting that symbolic exchange has become itself a kind of "haunting" failure for Baudrillard, a "real kernel" that only acts as an alibi for sign exchange in the same way that Sr functioned for Sd and EV for UV. In fact, the critique of Baudrillard's totalizing logic of the regime of the sign, the code, could find a new expression in precisely the idea that such totalization is only *assumed* to be the case (by Baudrillard or by us, in more pessimistic moments) insofar as one remains stuck in that earlier ideological relationship shifted to an even more fundamental structure (decision) of sign and symbolic exchange themselves.

However, if there is no return to classical theory and if, in a nihilistic age, there seems no escape from the bind of the end times and imminent catastrophe (even and especially in fatal strategy), it should not mean giving up entirely nor returning to naivety instead. Rather, diagnosing symbolic and sign exchange as a philosophical "decision," a *unilateral dualysis* might, with non-philosophical work, (re-)conceive of a Real irreducible to capitalist reality but without returning to naïve "objective" representation. This is the turn to Laruelle and non-Baudrillard that will now be attempted. The heretical, theoretically violent, solution is not in a return to representational theory, but going still further and, in Laruelle scholar Ray Brassier's terminology, "unbinding the void"<sup>68</sup> structuring manifes-

tation and representation as such. The classical (revolutionary) subject seems impotent in the face of continued failures and Baudrillardian critique, but the removal of resistant subjectivity altogether proves naïve. Instead, there is perhaps room for a different kind of subjectivity, a subject now as a collective orientation of praxis, something for which a non-Baudrillard might lay fertile ground.

## Non-Baudrillard

A brief orientation in Laruelian discourse is first required, preparing for the dense content that follows. For Laruelle the major limitation of standard philosophy is its decisional character, wherein "philosophy claims to determine itself beyond all its empirical determinations," such determinations already being prescribed by itself via an "auto-validation."<sup>69</sup> The decision leaves no counter-gift to the system (in Baudrillardian terms) and thus puts everything at the service of philosophy rather than at the service of man. Instead, non-philosophy aims to "found philosophy on man rather than the inverse, venture a history of the human existent that no longer owes anything to unitary prejudices."<sup>70</sup> It seeks to recover that which is "anterior to all decision"<sup>71</sup> and the process of achieving this is called cloning. To clone a decision one must identify a *unilateral dualysis* wherein an identity *in-the-last-instance* to the Real-One is possible. To achieve this, the terms are (re-)considered "as transcendental theorems insofar as they constitute the unilateral duality that accomplishes this identity,"<sup>72</sup> as theorems of philosophy but no longer ones held to be sufficient. Given this, duality is "unilateral"<sup>73</sup>

<sup>69</sup> François Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Nicola Rubczak and Anthony Paul Smith (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 4.

<sup>70</sup> François Laruelle, "Rigorous Science," 46.

<sup>71</sup> François Laruelle, "What Is Non-Philosophy?" in *From Decision to Heresy*, trans. Taylor Adkins, 186.

<sup>72</sup> François Laruelle, "A Summary of Non-Philosophy" in *From Decision to Heresy*, trans. Ray Brassier, 290, sec. 2.1.5-2.1.6.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nibil Unbound* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 97.

since it is in-the-last-instance identical (to) the Real-One. This cloning carried out on the basis of a vision-in-One, grasping at this Real-One in its foreclosure from philosophical thought.

This inquiry proposes cloning symbolic exchange and sign exchange, gift and counter-gift to generate two *first names*, each producing some new axioms. This is followed by a brief elucidation of why such dualysis functions (and how identity is only in-the-last-instance). The theoretical violence that this offers the inquiry will then be made apparent.

## Non-philosophical dualysis

First names are for Laruelle “non-conceptual symbols [cloned] on the basis of the intuitive and naïve concepts of philosophy,” but with the aim of “the suspension of their philosophical sense.”<sup>74</sup> To realize a non-Baudrillard, it is necessary to propose first names in order to suspend the “naïve concepts” of Baudrillard’s philosophy, which resulted only in fatal strategies and radical impotence, but without abandoning his contemporary import or theoretical insight. Non-Baudrillard aims to propose a non-fatal vision-in-One irreducible to the manifest decision of signified/signifier or symbolic exchange/sign exchange, the latter of which being only a re-engendering of the problems of the former, as suggested earlier. Two first names of a non-Baudrillard might be “exchanged-without-exchange” and “(counter-)gifted-without-giftedness.”

**1. exchanged-without-exchange.** This is a first name for the Real but from the angle of exchange and exchangeability. The Real is “exchanged-without-exchange” and from this the following axioms can be formulated: a) there is a fundamental exchanged which in its very fundamentality excludes exchange, b) because it is exchanged-with-

out-exchange and (in)-One, it does not exchange in or outside of itself.

## 2. (counter-)gifted-without-giftedness.

This is another first name for the Real, now cloned from Baudrillard’s philosophical concepts of the gift (of capitalism) and the counter-gift (thus far only having been fatal). The Real is “(counter-)gifted-without-giftedness and from this the following axiom can be formulated: c) there is a fundamental (counter-)gifted which in its very fundamentality excludes the giftedness (of capitalism).

These are attempts at capturing the immanency of the One prior to decision, in other words, of splitting “the identity of thought, on the one hand, and those practical consequences that thought habitually enunciates or programmes for the world, on the other,”<sup>75</sup> splitting the mental repetition and (re-)instantiation of a programme of (gifted) contemporary capital (and sign exchange) from an identity of collective or immanent thought (collective insofar as private language is impossible). This reveals that the decisions were only regionally determinate and thus absolutely indeterminate (in-the-last-instance) with regard to the identity of the Real. Yet how does the unilateral duality of each, guaranteeing identity only in-the-last-instance, function?

Taking first exchanged-without-exchange, its unilateral dualysis can be established, addressing the apparent aporia of impossible exchange and sign exchange, by guaranteeing sign exchange through granting it an autonomy but relative to a fundamental or “*transcendental* essence,”<sup>76</sup> located in the (symbolically-)exchanged-without-(sign-)exchange. Cloning on this basis escapes, or rather *transcendentalizes*, the deferral of sign exchange

<sup>74</sup> François Laruelle, *Dictionary of Non-Philosophy*, trans. Taylor Adkins (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2013), 150.

<sup>75</sup> François Laruelle, “What Can Non-Philosophy Do?” *Angelaki* 8, no. 2 (2003), 182.

<sup>76</sup> François Laruelle, *Principles*, 23.

by a radically exchanged of the One that is “absolutely outside-Being or outside-thought.”<sup>77</sup>

That is, whilst sign exchange retains relative autonomy, there is a demonstrated “*unilateral*” character of the causality of the first over the second,<sup>78</sup> as Laruelle would put it, which unbinds the exchanged itself from the absolute supremacy of the sign (exchange). Likewise, the reversal of the giftedness of capitalism in-the-last-instance to an already (counter-)gifted of the One makes capitalism only an *occasional* cause of the Real. The decision is not closed or sufficient and rather “is no longer primary or determining; it is instead unilaterally directed by a now radical undecided,”<sup>79</sup> already counter-gifted by the One which is in-the-last-instance exchanged with it, at least, when rendered undecided by the vision-in-One.

Where, then, is the possible conditioning of a new subject, understood as a practical and oriented conditioning of collective action? This new “subject” should be founded as immanent to the radically undecided in-the-last-instance of exchanged-without-exchange, as a counter-gift against capital, but it is unclear that Laruelle’s non-philosophy offers the true theoretical violence by which to bring this through, since it perhaps lacks the “monstrosity” (returning to the Deleuzian term) of radical breakage or refusal. Thus, a few remarks on a provisionally named man-to-come will be given returning to a general register, albeit one now “unbound” from the decision of capitalist sign exchange and ready to grasp philosophy as a tool for new and more radical trajectories.

### Man-to-come (the counter-gift)

This concluding section takes up contemporary questioning concerning revolutionary structural change and the obstacles this faces. It strives to

substantiate that an unbounded non-Baudrillard, exchanged-without-exchange and (counter-)gifted-without-giftedness, may offer the theoretical violence prerequisite to face them.

One specific problem encountered by those proposing structural revolution is an essentially theoretical one, concerning predicting life’s requirements under post-capitalism and developing new structures which can mutate to meet emerging demands whilst simultaneously addressing the transitioning from current conditions. In Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’ *#Accelerate*, a bold vision for non-sentimental “Promethean politics”<sup>80</sup> is declared, proposing an employment of technological automation to meet growing societal demands within an accelerated post-capitalist future. Yet this politics is not inevitable with technological progress but rather necessitates “post-capitalist planning” needing “both a cognitive map of the existing system and a speculative image of the future economic system,”<sup>81</sup> the latter imagined from outside the apparent sufficiency of the present. There are two key points of concern, one of a contemporary “map” and one of a future “image,” but it can be argued that a non-Baudrillardian project provides interesting clarifications and strategic approaches with both.

Initially, non-Baudrillard can aid the development of a “cognitive map” of the present via understanding and reframing the logic of sign exchange and code found to play a key part in modern capitalist functionality. The reframing of sign exchange shows that it can characterize a logic or tendency of philosophy and intersubjective communication under capitalism without sufficiently overdetermining all disciplines and practices *tout court*. This is because unilateral duality between symbolic and sign exchange does

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>80</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, “#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics,” *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, 2nd ed. (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2017), 360.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 356.



not require repeating a naïve position but rather permits, in-the-last-instance, identity to and thus non-sufficiency over other regional domains of knowledge production. This allows the philosophical analysis of a precession of simulacra and the regime of the sign under capitalism (and the disappearance of symbolic exchange which is also an anthropological analysis) to complement, or rather be complemented by, alternative knowledge-producing practices such as scientific endeavors, normative formulation and technological creation. This becomes crucial, particularly in the context of a Promethean project referred to above, since it permits an unbinding of regional sciences or practices from the sign exchange as totalizing logic and thus permits alternative knowings to map the delineations of such logic, firstly, but also, secondly, begins to speculate on an image of possible escape.

Furthermore, non-Baudrillard unbinds the possibility for a radical counter-gift founded in practices immanent to the Real from which a subject, non-representational collective, in fidelity to them can turn *against* capitalism. The possibilities unlocked by technological knowledge production (unconfined by semiotic capitalism) were already mentioned briefly with relation to Srnicek and Williams, but another interconnected broader example can be found in Brassier. He suggests how unbinding a scientific image from the manifest (phenomenological, for Brassier) image provides major theoretical and pragmatic advantages.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, unbinding scientific knowledge-making practices from sign exchange, in the service of a more utopian and collective knowledge production, no longer reproducing the same oppressive structuration, seems similarly advantageous. The supremacy of the sign is already exchanged-for by the counter-gift of such practices, whose immanent potential need only be brought out – this is what a non-Baudrillard legitimates.

Lastly, therefore, non-Baudrillard takes form,

<sup>82</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*.

as its new subject, in this very act of returning to immanent regional knowings anew, from the perspective of a man-to-come recognizing philosophical and capitalist insufficiency in a double sense: decision as insufficient in-the-last-instance and capitalist sign exchange as insufficient normatively, as being inadequate to knowledge production by proliferating the limitations of the manifest image and, according to Srnicek and Williams, holding back technological progress too.<sup>83</sup> This facilitates both aspects of post-capitalist planning and is genuinely theoretically violent insofar as it does violence to common theory, refusing to accept naïve or impotent theorizations by returning to classical subjectivity or accepting the totalizing logic presented fatally by Baudrillard. It offers a (counter-)gift to the giftedness of capital in the form of a violent “terrorizing” of congealed thinking and an opening of heretical strategy, or at least more democratic knowledge production, the speculative site of this new subject this article proposes. The work of establishing this having barely begun, but a speculative groundwork at least now laid.

## Conclusion

Reinvigorating a thinking of an escape from the end times requires proposing a counter-gift offering theoretical violence against the manifest and closed imagination of theory and capitalism’s *status quo*. This involves re-interrogating Baudrillard’s thinking with regard to sign and symbolic exchange, gift and counter-gift but a rejection of his fatal strategies as being only superficially terroristic towards the manifest, ultimately only pushing totalization and self-destruction further. Escaping this, a non-Baudrillard was proposed which cloned Baudrillard’s concepts into the structures of unilateral dualyses which suspended their philosophical sufficiency. This opens up the potential for a new subject through an unbinding of the manifest, the beginnings of which being examined specu-

<sup>83</sup> Srnicek and Williams, *#Accelerate*, 335, sec. 03.3.

latively under the name of a man-to-come.

Assembling all this together entailed examining the conditions of a counter-gift immanent and already-exchanged within exchange itself, suggested to be located in the plurality of knowledge practices, capable of engineering a non-totalizing escape. Future inquiry must push further still, rejecting the sufficiency of philosophy not at the service of man, but also pushing for a subject and image of man (and man in capitalism) which is no longer classically human, with all its histories of racial and gendered exclusions, but rather (in-)human. An (in-)human pragmatic subject as given in the radicality of its knowledge practices, not from a presumed essence located in our primitive past.